



Guidelines for Safer Church Courts and Committees

A. Introduction

In 2021, the General Assembly called for the development of guidelines to help make the courts and committees of the church safer spaces for all. This work was assigned to the Life and Mission Agency, with instruction that the resource should include guidance on the ways that people speak to one another (A&P 2021, p. 663, 22).¹

The guidelines are presented in several sections, as noted below:

- Section B provides essential context for the requested guidelines, by reviewing three reports received and several recommendations adopted by the General Assembly in 2021. This material, which focused on the approach of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to gender and sexuality, sets the table for the kinds of guidance offered in the guidelines.
- Section C outlines the nature and scope of the guidelines and directs the church's attention to three areas; each one is covered in a subsequent section.
- Section D: Acknowledging the Full Diversity of Gender and Sexuality
- Section E: Treating One Another Respectfully When Disagreeing
- Section F: Addressing Harassment and Abuse
- Section G: Closing Remarks

B. Context

The context of the General Assembly's call for the development of these guidelines informs the kinds of guidance being requested. In 2021, the General Assembly received three reports about the approach of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to gender and sexuality and adopted a number of recommendations on this topic.

1. The Committee on Remits

At each General Assembly, the report of the Committee on Remits outlines the results of voting by presbyteries on remits that the previous General Assembly had sent down to presbyteries under the Barrier Act² (the three-step process by which The Presbyterian Church in Canada

¹ The decisions of various General Assemblies are recorded in the *Acts and Proceedings*, which are the minutes of the General Assembly. References to an *Acts and Proceedings* use the short form "A&P," followed by the year.

² The Barrier Act is the three-step process by which The Presbyterian Church in Canada changes its law and doctrine:

1. One General Assembly agrees to make a change in church law or doctrine. As outlined in the Barrier Act (Book of Forms sections 293 – 293.4), however, the responses of the presbyteries to the proposed change must be considered by a subsequent General Assembly before it is permitted to make the change a permanent part of the church's law or doctrine.

changes its law and doctrine). Two remits from the General Assembly in 2019 addressed matters pertaining to gender and sexuality:

Remit B, 2019 re Definition of Marriage (A&P 2019, p. 51)

That The Presbyterian Church in Canada holds two parallel definitions of marriage and recognizes that faithful, Holy Spirit filled, Christ centered, God honouring people can understand marriage as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or as a covenant relationship between two adult persons. That congregations, sessions, ruling and teaching elders be granted liberty of conscience and action on marriage.

Remit C, 2019 re Ordination of LGBTQI³ Persons (married or single) (A&P 2019, p. 52)

That congregations and presbyteries may call and ordain as ministers and elect and ordain as ruling elders LGBTQI persons (married or single) with the provision that liberty of conscience and action regarding participation in ordinations, inductions and installations be granted to ministers and ruling elders.

The 2021 report of the Committee on Remits presented the results of the voting by presbyteries on Remits B and C, 2019. The responses of the presbyteries approving both remits permitted the General Assembly in 2021 to consider adopting the remits (A&P 2021, p. 583 – 584).

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2. The proposed change is sent (or remitted) to the presbyteries, where each presbytery votes either to approve or to disapprove the proposed change.
 3. A report tabulating the decisions of the presbyteries to approve or to disapprove the remit is presented to the next General Assembly. Provided a majority of presbyteries voted to approve the proposed change and this majority of presbyteries together constitute a majority of ministers, members of the Order of Diaconal Ministers and elders on the constituent rolls of all presbyteries, the General Assembly that receives the “report on remits” is free to adopt the change into the church’s law or doctrine.

³ LGBTQI is an acronym that collectively refers to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning or intersex. More definitions can be found in the glossary available at presbyterian.ca/downloads/61802

Lesbian – a woman who is emotionally, romantically and/or physically attracted to other women.

Gay – an adjective to describe people who are emotionally, romantically and/or physically attracted to people of the same gender.

Bisexual – a person who experiences attraction to both their own gender, as well as to people of a different gender.

Transgender – a person who does not identify either fully or in part with the gender associated with the sex assigned to them at birth; often used as an umbrella term to represent a wide range of gender identities and expressions.

Queer/questioning – the word queer is an adjective used by some people whose sexual orientation is not exclusively heterosexual. Questioning describes those who are in a process of discovery and exploration about their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression or a combination thereof.

Intersex – refers to individuals born with bodies that appear neither typically male nor female, often arising from hormonal or chromosomal anomalies or ambiguous genitalia.

The 2021 General Assembly adopted the parallel definitions of marriage detailed in Remit B, 2019, making this the law of the church (A&P 2021 p. 27). Both definitions—a covenant relationship between a man and a woman, and a covenant relationship between two adult persons—are considered valid within The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The 2021 General Assembly also approved the ordination of LGBTQI persons as detailed in Remit C, 2019 (A&P 2021, p. 28).

2. Special Committee re. LGBTQI Listening (Rainbow Communion)

In 2021, the Special Committee re. LGBTQI Listening, which is also known as the Rainbow Communion, presented its final report to the General Assembly (A&P 2021, p. 584 – 704, 22, 23).

Established in 2017, the Rainbow Communion was asked to create a safe, respectful and confidential environment for LGBTQI people and others to tell their stories—stories of harm done to them within and by the church, as well as stories of God’s grace experienced by them and Christian ministry performed by them. In its reports to the General Assembly, the Rainbow Communion would recount these experiences, with author permission and while maintaining confidentiality. Further, the Rainbow Communion was tasked with providing appropriate responses to the issues of homophobia⁴, hypocrisy, heterosexism⁵ and transphobia⁶ within The Presbyterian Church in Canada (A&P 2017, p. 477 – 478, 28, 45 - 46; A&P 2018, p. 462, 27).

The final report provided substantial details and analysis of the information offered to the Rainbow Communion as it listened to those who told their stories. The report presented 23 recommendations, all of which were adopted by the 2021 General Assembly.

The following recommendations of the Rainbow Communion were of particular relevance for understanding the context of the requested “Guidelines for Safer Church Courts and Committees” (A&P 2021, p. 617, 654, 658, 661, 663, 667, 668, 22):

⁴ Homophobia is fear and/or hatred of lesbian or gay individuals. Homophobia is often exhibited by name-calling, bullying, exclusion, prejudice, discrimination or acts of violence towards anyone who is lesbian or gay. In other words, homophobia is any aversion to those that are not heterosexual. More definitions can be found in the glossary available at presbyterian.ca/downloads/61802

⁵ Heterosexual refers to a person who experiences attraction to people of a different sex and/or gender. Also referred to as “straight.”

Heterosexism is the assumption that heterosexuality is the social and cultural norm, as well as the prejudiced belief that heterosexuals or “straight” people are socially and culturally superior to LGBTQI people. Heterosexism is the systemic bias that favours heterosexuals and heterosexuality. It stems from the idea that male and female roles, thoughts and expressions are separate and distinct. A common example of heterosexism is assuming that everyone is straight.

⁶ Transphobia is fear and/or hatred of transgender individuals. Transphobia is often exhibited by name-calling, bullying, exclusion, prejudice, discrimination or acts of violence towards anyone who is or is assumed to be transgender, thought to be transgender or whose gender expression doesn’t conform to traditional gender roles.

- That The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirm that all people, whatever their sexual orientation or gender identity, are equally beloved by God.
- That identifying as LGBTQI and/or being in a same-sex marriage not be grounds for discipline and censure in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
- That The Presbyterian Church in Canada reject without qualification the false claim that those who identify as LGBTQI are any more likely to be involved in paedophilia or the molestation or abuse of children or vulnerable adults than any other persons.
- That The Presbyterian Church in Canada offer a public confession to all individuals and congregations that have been harmed by the church in excluding and marginalizing people who identify as LGBTQI. The confession would acknowledge the church's responsibility for the harm done, seek forgiveness from God and from those who have been harmed, and commit the church to a true change of heart and behaviour.
- That a Special Committee be appointed by the General Assembly to prepare the Confession for harm done to LGBTQI people before the next General Assembly. The Confession will be given public expression in a Service of Worship led by the Moderator and will be live streamed, recorded and made available for use by the church.
- That members of The Presbyterian Church in Canada be encouraged to participate in the service of worship that gives public expression to the confession for harm done to LGBTQI people and to work individually and as congregations and the courts of the church to live out this confession and commitment so that harm does not continue.
- That all congregations, presbyteries, synods and theological colleges be encouraged to use the Life and Mission Agency-updated resources for worship and to review their own practices and the language that they use in worship.
- That with the support of the resources from the Life and Mission Agency, the courts of the church, agencies, colleges, and camps review and update their policies, procedures and practices, including the language used, by June 2022, to ensure they reflect the full inclusion of all people.
- That by June 2022, the Life and Mission Agency develop guidelines, including how we speak to one another, for helping make the courts and committees of the church safer spaces for all.

3. Feedback about Remit B and Remit C (2019) Proposing Changes to Church Law and Doctrine Pertaining to Marriage and Ordination

In 2021, the Life and Mission Agency presented its report detailing church-wide feedback about the proposed changes to church law and doctrine outlined in Remit B and Remit C (2019). The 2019 General Assembly had assigned this work to the Life and Mission Agency in the following terms:

That as a matter of urgency, the Life and Mission Agency provide a means for those affected by this decision to express their concerns, views and pain in a safe environment and that the concerns be reported back to the 2020 General Assembly before the report on remits is received and its recommendations considered (A&P 2019, 51).

The intention of this directive was to collect information for the next General Assembly about how individuals across the church felt about the proposed changes, in addition to the input that presbyteries would have by voting on the remits.

The listening process developed and implemented by the Life and Mission Agency included an online tool, which allowed individuals to submit their comments electronically, and numerous scheduled in-person listening events held in settings such as presbytery meetings.

The thoughts and feelings expressed present a picture of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that is diverse and complex. There are various different beliefs about God's intentions concerning gender, sexuality and marriage; about the people whom Christ calls into ministry; about scripture; and about Christian discipleship. People across the theological spectrum expressed differences in their level of conviction. Some are strongly formed in their views, while others indicated that they are less sure, still questioning. People across the theological spectrum voiced a whole range of attitudes to those holding different views from their own. Some described maintaining feelings of Christian love, respect and prayerfulness for the people who disagreed with them; others indicated that they felt contempt, anger and embarrassment for the people whom they regarded as opponents.

Differences across the church do not comprise the entire picture presented by the information collected in the listening process. There are commonalities as well. In fact, one striking impression is how much is shared by people across the entire theological spectrum. The list contains shared principles and perspectives that are deeply important to people in The Presbyterian Church in Canada: love for and devotion to God, following Jesus, reliance on the Holy Spirit, honouring scripture, love for the church and concern for its welfare, love for their local congregation and concern for its welfare, commitment to mission, and concern for the nature and fruitfulness of the church's witness to the love of Christ.

The listening report highlighted three areas requiring special attention:

- Pastoral care
 - The sheer volume and intensity of comments describing feelings of worry, dismay and hurt speak to people's need for tenderness, care and prayer. Pastoral care is an integral part of the church's ministry in every season, but at this time, this need is especially urgent.
- Education
 - Sometimes strong feelings, concerns and views were based on inaccurate assumptions. Comments revealed widespread lack of knowledge about matters such as church polity, church history, and the church's doctrinal understanding of marriage, sexuality and the scriptures. Without doubt, this reality has hampered the church's discussions on sexuality generally and on Remit B and Remit C (2019) specifically. Misunderstandings and inaccuracies have added to and caused some of the mistrust and pain that some people expressed.
- Respectful treatment of persons when disagreeing

The feedback from across the church underscores the importance of how people treat one another while they disagree. This is true even when starkly different opinions are held with strength and conviction. The ways people interact with one another shape the vibrancy of the church's faith and the quality of its witness to the love of Christ.

This review of the reports about gender and sexuality presented to the 2021 General Assembly provides much-needed context for the requested "Guidelines for Safer Church Courts and Committees." With the adoption of two parallel definitions of marriage and approval of the ordination of LGBTQI persons, the General Assembly changed the law and doctrine of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The report of the Rainbow Communion described the harm that LGBTQI people and others have experienced within the church, and recommended ways to address this injustice. With the adoption of those recommendations, especially the decision to prepare and offer a public confession, the General Assembly has committed The Presbyterian Church in Canada to working to prevent further harm to LGBTQI persons and their families in the denomination. The report of the Life and Mission Agency summarized feedback from individuals across the church to the proposed changes to law and doctrine, and highlighted the importance of the ways people treat one another when they disagree.

C. Nature and Scope of the Guidelines

As directed by the 2021 General Assembly, the requested guidelines are to focus on the parts of the church's life and ministry that take place in its courts—Sessions, presbyteries, synods and General Assemblies—and in the committees that work for and report to those church courts. The purpose of the requested guidance is to help make church courts and committees safer spaces for all.

In light of the context described in section B, the requested guidance is framed in three parts:

- acknowledging the full diversity of gender and sexuality
- treating all persons respectfully, no matter which of the two definitions of marriage adopted by the General Assembly they affirm
- addressing harassment and abuse with the established policies of The Presbyterian Church in Canada

D. Acknowledging the Full Diversity of Gender and Sexuality

With its decisions about how to approach gender and sexuality, the General Assembly in 2021 committed The Presbyterian Church in Canada to substantial changes.

One change is the acknowledgement that gender and sexuality are diverse. In fact, the church has prepared and will offer public confession acknowledging that The Presbyterian Church has caused harm in excluding and marginalizing LGBTQI people. With the confession, the denomination will take responsibility and seek forgiveness for the harm done, while learning how to address barriers encountered by LGBTQI persons within the denomination and to prevent further harm.

The personal stories presented in the report of the Rainbow Communion recount the hurt experienced when the church has not acknowledged the full diversity of gender and sexuality. Quite apart from the question of marriage and ordination, the church has assumed that all people are heterosexual and fit certain expectations related to gender. The result of this assumption can be that some people feel there is no place for them in the church.

To illustrate with an example that happens in public worship services, when the worshippers in the sanctuary are referred to as “brothers and sisters in Christ” and “God’s sons and daughters,” how can individuals who do not use these words to describe themselves feel welcome? By choosing alternate expressions, such as “siblings in Christ” or “God’s children,” the possibility of alienating some worshippers can be reduced. Failing to acknowledge LGBTQI persons and causing them to feel unwelcome are part of the harm that The Presbyterian Church in Canada intends to include in its public confession.

Learning to acknowledge, accept and respect the full diversity of gender and sexuality will require effort and commitment across the denomination. This responsibility belongs to everyone who participates in the life and ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. The church needs all its people, across the entire theological spectrum, to engage in this work.

At the same time, the church courts, agencies, colleges and camps of the denomination are expected to play a central role in making these changes. For this reason, the General Assembly instructed the decision-making, educational and program bodies to review their policies, procedures and practices, including the language used; to identify and revise aspects that fail to reflect the full inclusion of all people; and to complete this work by June 2022. Further, the General Assembly instructed the Life and Mission Agency to provide resources to assist with this work.

Guidance to Help Amend Policy, Procedure and Practice to Reflect the Church’s Decisions about Gender and Sexuality (2022) was prepared to meet this need. The full document is commended to the church for careful reading and implementation (presbyterian.ca/2022/02/01/guidance-inclusion/). For the purpose of this discussion, however, a brief sketch of the contents is presented below.

What kinds of documents and practices should be reviewed? Suggestions include standing orders of church courts; mandates or terms of reference of committees; personnel policy manuals for staff and volunteers; employee search, selection and hiring procedures, including interviews; contracts for rental of church facilities; events, such as youth gatherings; worship services, especially words used to refer to people and to God.

Where should the review and revision be focused? What elements of policy, procedure and practice hold the potential either to reflect or to fail to reflect the full inclusion of all people? The following list identifies some aspects of the church’s life that merit scrutiny:

- words to describe or address people

The full diversity of gender and sexuality cannot be reflected by words that imply that there are only two genders—male and female—or that acknowledge only the intimate relationships between a man and a woman. Such words deny the experience and reality of individuals, and perpetuate an incomplete, binary (two-fold) view of human sexuality.

- words to describe or address God

Worship is enhanced by language to refer to God that is expansive, encompassing the rich variety of ways God is described in the scriptures. Where possible, avoiding the use of masculine pronouns for God will help to cultivate an image of God that is not exclusively male.

- providing facilities for everyone

When ministries review their facilities, some attention will be directed towards assessing whether washrooms are accessible and available to people of all genders. The same care is taken with other amenities requiring privacy and safety, such as change rooms, and sleeping accommodations in overnight programs.

- hiring practices of church entities with employees

Employment is one of the areas protected against discrimination in Canada. The prohibited grounds of discrimination in all the human rights codes—federal, provincial and territorial—list sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status and family status; in addition, some codes include gender expression. During interviews, employers must take care to seek only information pertaining to the job's essential duties and bona fide requirements. Questions that, directly or indirectly, enquire about one of the protected grounds are not permitted.

- pastoral care and community life

A fifth focus moves beyond matters of policy and procedure to pastoral care and community life. Changing a congregation's practices to reflect full inclusion more faithfully might begin with the question, "Which aspects of the congregation's ministry need to be changed to better meet the needs of LGBTQI persons and their families in the congregation and in the wider community?" A Session conducting this assessment might invite feedback from within the congregation, and might also consult with other congregations and community organizations. The same kind of assessment could be conducted by those providing leadership in a presbytery or synod (including regional youth programs), church camp, college or agency.

Learning to acknowledge, accept and respect the full diversity of gender and sexuality is spiritual work. It calls the church to cultivate receptivity to God's Holy Spirit, to listen, to develop openness and flexibility, to act with diligence and intention, and to grow in compassion.

The scope of this work far exceeds making changes to the church's policies, procedures and practices. Nevertheless, the importance of examining and revising the ways the church conducts its life cannot be overestimated. Certainly, progress in these tasks will contribute greatly to making church courts and committees safer for all.

E. Treating One Another Respectfully when Disagreeing

The adoption of parallel definitions of marriage means that some people in The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirm marriage as a covenantal relationship between a man and a woman, while other people affirm marriage as a covenantal relationship between two adult persons. This, in turn, means that people who participate in the life of the denomination, particularly if their involvement extends to serving on church courts and committees, will encounter individuals who affirm a different definition than their own. The theological differences across the church are real and significant.

Experience teaches that relationships are most challenging when the people involved disagree about matters they consider to be important. Treating others with respect and taking appropriate

responsibility are such hard work. In the midst of conflict, Christians often draw on the spiritual resources of their faith, such as confidence in God's abiding presence, trust in the healing power of prayer, and openness to the transforming movement of the Holy Spirit. In the midst of conflict, Christians often seek to cultivate the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

The Presbyterian Church in Canada expects the people who share its life and ministry to treat one another with respect, even when they disagree. In fact, the church recognizes that differences of opinion are part of its life and ministry; it is for this reason that decisions at all levels are made after discussion and debate. The adoption of two parallel definitions of marriage means that affirming either definition is permitted. Individuals should be free to say which definition they affirm without being reviled or subjected to personal attacks or accused of attacking others.

Nevertheless, the same respect should be offered to the listener. Care must be taken to avoid causing harm to others, to the fullest extent possible. Words matter. Words hold the potential to bring clarity or to muddy the waters, to forge bridges or to erect barriers, to draw people close or to push them away, to foster healing or to inflict harm. Therefore, what is said and the manner of speaking—tone and volume of voice, facial expression, body language, context—all these characteristics merit special care.

This discussion leads to the conclusion that guidelines for the way people in the church speak to one another cannot include a list of rules. The requested guidance cannot be reduced to a set of statements about what can and cannot be said. Rather, what can be offered are some hypothetical situations that illustrate underlying principles. While the examples described below are imagined to take place in a presbytery, other church courts and committees could apply them with appropriate adjustments.

Presbytery Supper Example

At the first presbytery meeting of the fall season, the presbytery hosts a dinner to give the members of presbytery a chance to visit with one another in a relaxed, informal setting. In the hour before the presbytery meeting opens with the installation of the moderator, people are sitting around the supper tables enjoying food and conversation.

People first talk about how they have spent the summer. Apparently, it was a busy wedding season for the presbytery! There were several family weddings in the group—some were same-sex marriages and others were marriages of heterosexual couples. All were held in the sanctuary of the family's congregation, according to the decisions made by the different congregations about which marriages they host on their premises. Everyone at the table is aware that different theological positions are represented among them. The conversation is amicable and friendly.

The conversation turns to the fall start-up of congregational programs and activities, a topic of interest for all. Elder A describes with enthusiasm a new format for the church school program and the role that the elder is excited to have in it. Elder B frowns and looks uncomfortable. Whichever definition of marriage Elder A affirms—and it can be either one—what is important for this illustration is that Elder B affirms the other definition.

Why does Elder B frown? Elder B is thinking about the fact that Elder A would never be permitted to teach children in Elder B's congregation, because its Session has decided that any form of teaching ministry is open only to individuals who affirm the definition of marriage that the Session affirms.

Elder B decides to explain the policy of Elder B's Session. Elder B considers it scandalous that Elder A is teaching church school children. In rising, strident tones, Elder B states that individuals who hold the "other" definition of marriage—which Elder B regards as inferior and potentially dangerous—should not be permitted to shape the Christian faith development of the congregation's young ones.

Everyone at the table bristles, and the spirit of friendly concord vanishes. Face flushing with anger and embarrassment, Elder A recoils as if struck.

Elder B's comments reveal that Elder B does not accept that The Presbyterian Church in Canada affirms two parallel definitions of marriage. Furthermore, Elder B has turned a disagreement over theology into a personal attack on Elder A. There is no good reason for Elder B to outline the policy of Elder B's Session in this conversation, and using the Session policy to criticize Elder A could cause harm: Elder B's words are hurtful and needlessly divisive.

Presbytery Worship Service Example

A group of presbytery members—perhaps the interim moderator, presbytery clerk and presbytery moderator—are planning a presbytery worship service to take place in a congregation when the presbytery meets to induct the minister the congregation has called. As it happens, the worship planners all affirm the same definition of marriage. They are aware, and it is widely known, that the congregation and its new minister affirm the other definition of marriage. Whichever definition of marriage the worship planners affirm—and it can be either one—what is important for this illustration is that the calling congregation affirms the other definition.

The worship planners decide that the presbytery service provides them with the perfect opportunity to persuade the people of the calling congregation of the error of their beliefs. The presbytery induction service is simply too good an opportunity to pass up, and besides, the spiritual health of the calling congregation may hang in the balance. The worship planners select the elements of the worship service—scripture readings, sermon title and theme, hymns, prayers—to present the case in favour of the definition of marriage the planners affirm and to refute the definition of marriage affirmed by the congregation.

This hypothetical case seems rather blatant and unrealistic, and yet this does not imply that it finds no basis in reality. There are several problems with this approach and the attitudes it conveys. The worship planners have not accepted the reality that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has adopted two parallel definitions of marriage. The worship planners display a lack of respect for the calling congregation, which affirms one of the denomination's two adopted definitions of marriage. The worship planners believe they have the right, and perhaps the responsibility, to change the beliefs of the calling congregation. Treating the calling congregation like a "captive audience" is unfair. As described in this hypothetical case, such intentional behaviour may be regarded as a form of spiritual abuse.

It is important to explain what this hypothetical example does and does not say. On the one hand, there are contexts within congregational life where teaching about one definition of marriage or the other may be appropriate. For absolute clarity, this principle should be emphasized: Presbyterians are free to teach about the definition of marriage they affirm, as long as it is one of the two parallel definitions adopted by the General Assembly. This hypothetical example does not speak against such teaching.

On the other hand, there are occasions when teaching one of the adopted definitions of marriage over and against the other definition is not appropriate. What this hypothetical example suggests is that presbytery meetings do not provide an appropriate context. The members of presbytery meet as a church court to act collectively to fulfill the presbytery's duties; the presbyters have equal voice and vote,⁷ and the church expects all presbyters to be treated with respect, regardless of which of the two parallel definitions of marriage adopted by the General Assembly they affirm.

In planning events where participants are known to hold a variety of opinions, such as presbytery worship services, care should be taken to avoid arguing the case for one definition of marriage or the other. Whether it is a worship service for a regular presbytery meeting, or for an induction, an ordination or a recognition of certified candidates, the range of beliefs present among the worshippers should be respected. The "captive audience" approach is unfair, and likely would yield distrust and fracturing dissension.

Presbytery Meeting Example

In a regular presbytery meeting, the members of presbytery are discussing a proposal to create a new fall event that will bring together the junior youth groups of the presbytery's congregations for a weekend of fun, food, and spiritual nourishment. The intention is to kick-start the junior youth programs in the various congregations: since many junior youth groups are small, with only a handful of youth, the experience of being together in a large group may be appealing and energizing for the local groups, getting them off to a good start for the church year.

A member of presbytery (Presbyter A) rises to express concerns about the theological perspectives of the individuals who might be chosen to lead the junior youth event. Presbyter A makes disparaging remarks about anyone who affirms the "other" definition of marriage, that is, the definition that Presbyter A does not affirm. In Presbyter A's view, people affirming the "other" definition of marriage cannot teach from the bible and think theologically with any integrity; they do not display evidence of a Spirit-filled life; and they should not be permitted to teach the presbytery's youth. Whichever definition of marriage the Presbyter A affirms—and it can be either one—what is important for this illustration is that Presbyter A speaks in harshly negative terms about people who affirm the other definition.

The level of tension in the room rises precipitously. A wave of dismay passes through the gathering, as many presbyters can almost see walls forming between people. The presbytery has been trying hard to carry out its work even with the differences of theological viewpoints its members hold, but in this moment, it feels like the presbytery's efforts are failing.

What happens next? More than one possible ending can be imagined for this hypothetical case.

In one scenario, the presbytery essentially sidesteps the matter. A motion is placed referring the proposed youth event back to the presbytery committee for further study, and the presbytery quickly agrees. The rest of the presbytery's business is completed in a perfunctory manner, at record speed, as people for the most part look down at their laps; doodling on the printed presbytery reports and pushing back nail cuticles apparently hold people's interest. The energy level in the room is low; chatter, laughter and any form of lively banter are absent. As soon as the meeting is adjourned, people silently get their

⁷ Book of Forms, sections 4 and 4.1.

coats and head for their cars. In the parking lot, however, clusters of like-minded presbyters form and the animated conversation is bitter with complaints about what “the others” have said and done. With these behaviours, the members of presbytery display the classic signs of a group of people who feel discouraged, powerless, hopeless, and totally overwhelmed by conflict they believe will defeat them.

In a second scenario, a member of presbytery (Presbyter B) rises and, addressing the Moderator, is given permission to speak. Presbyter B asks if the presbytery can pause the discussion for a moment, to take a step back while reflecting on the decisions that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has taken about its approach to gender and sexuality. Presbyter B reminds the court that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has adopted two parallel definitions of marriage, and has recognized that faithful Christian disciples can hold either definition. Moreover, the decision of the General Assembly means that both definitions are considered valid in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Presbyter B then points out that living with the new reality of two parallel definitions of marriage is going to take some adjustment. While many individuals know precisely which definition they affirm, leaving respectful space for others to affirm the other definition is going to require learning. And that is going to mean some people making mistakes, for when does learning ever happen without mistakes?

Some people can be seen nodding their heads in agreement; it seems that what Presbyter B is saying is striking a chord. People appear thoughtful; perhaps some individuals are reflecting on the adjustment they will need to make in their own attitudes to others. It looks as if, at this point, there would be fair consensus that Presbyter A’s comments are out of line.

The tension in the room lowers noticeably. People seem to have relaxed somewhat—facial expressions and postures no longer convey alarm and combativeness.

The Moderator thanks Presbyter B, and reminds the members of presbytery to keep in mind what Presbyter B has said. Discussion of the proposed junior youth event continues.

Looking down the road in this second hypothetical scenario, plans for the presbytery-wide junior youth event continue to develop. The criteria for selecting leaders for the event are set: these individuals have demonstrated skill in youth ministry; they have positive regard for all persons regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity; they affirm one definition of marriage and can speak with respect about people who hold the other view. The end result is a leadership team with a mix of skills, personalities and theological perspectives. Registrations proceed well. While most congregations send youth, a few choose not to participate; this, too, shows the church learning to live into the new reality of two parallel definitions of marriage.

These two presbytery-meeting scenarios illustrate the reality that presbyteries have options. After Presbyter A speaks, there is more than one way that the next scenes in this hypothetical situation can unfold. Certainly, the first scenario is one option: the presbytery meeting adjourns and its members disperse as quickly as possible. Afterwards, many get together with like-minded individuals to rant about the inadequacies and injustices of “the others.”

Another option, not explored above, is for a member of presbytery to make formal complaint about Presbyter A’s comments, so that the presbytery is required to judge Presbyter A’s behaviour. This could result in the presbytery disciplining Presbyter A, for instance with admonition or rebuke. The Book of

Forms outlines how to initiate judicial process in sections 313 – 443;⁸ using these steps when a member of presbytery speaks inappropriately remains a valid option.

Nevertheless, the second scenario for this hypothetical presbytery meeting describes yet another approach. No matter how discouraged the members of presbytery may feel, the fact is, they are not powerless. Since all presbyters have voice—the right to speak when acknowledged by the Moderator—and since all share responsibility for the actions of the court, one person can stand up and ask to speak. Like Presbyter B, it may be possible to speak in a calm, neutral manner that helps people move beyond their initial reactivity, a state that tends to be characterized by responses of “fight, flight or freeze.” It may be possible to help people to become engaged in thinking, to stand back from the immediate upsetting stimulus, and to gain perspective. A single member of presbytery, with wise and careful comments, may succeed in guiding the presbytery to be its best self.

The church’s faith and witness are most vibrant when Christians nurture and use the gifts they have received from the Holy Spirit. Often, the exercise of spiritual gifts within the church takes the form of “one another” ministries. As explained many times in the New Testament, Christians are called to love one another, to pray for one another, to carry one another’s burdens, to seek good for one another, to admonish one another, to forgive one another, and in humility, to consider others better than themselves.⁹ Presbyter B’s comments can be seen as an instance of “one another” ministry: someone who has adjusted to the church’s adoption of two parallel definitions of marriage seeks to help others who are struggling to do the same.

Treating people with respect when disagreeing is one facet of the challenges facing The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Rather than looking for guidance in the form of rules, Presbyterians can find direction in the gospel mandate to love, the nurturing of the Spirit’s gifts, and the fruits that demonstrate mature Christian discipleship.

F. Addressing Harassment and Abuse

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has established policies of zero tolerance for harassment and abuse in various forms. The General Assembly adopted policy and procedures to address sexual abuse and sexual harassment in 1993, racial harassment in 2008, and harassment including bullying in 2021.

These policies share a number of important commonalities. All three policies state that they apply to every church leader, staff or volunteer participating in the life and ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada. Furthermore, all three policies voice the commitment of The Presbyterian Church in Canada to take every complaint seriously, handling it according to the established procedures in a timely manner.

To illustrate the kinds of behaviours covered by these policies, excerpts follow. The policies can be downloaded at presbyterian.ca/safety-policies

The Policy for Dealing with Sexual Abuse and Sexual Harassment

⁹ Many New Testament passages give examples of “one another” ministries. The following list of biblical references are a few of the places where the kinds of “one another” ministries mentioned in this document are found: John 13:34; James 5:16; Galatians 6:2; I Thessalonians 5:15; Colossians 3:13, 16; Philippians 2:3.

Sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to, any unwanted sexual contact.

Sexual contact includes, but is not limited to, sexual intercourse, genital contact, petting, fondling, sexually suggestive language or the display of pornography.

Sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to, sexual assault and other sexual offences involving children as defined in the Criminal Code of Canada.

Sexual abuse includes, but is not limited to, sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is defined as:

- a course of vexatious comment or conduct that is known or ought reasonably to be known to be unwelcome, including repeated sexual remarks or physical contact that is degrading
- a sexual advance or solicitation made by a person who is in a position to grant or deny a benefit to another
- the threat of or an actual reprisal by a person in authority against a person who has rejected a sexual advance from that person in authority.

Growing in Christ: Seeing the Image of God in our Neighbour. The Policy of The Presbyterian Church in Canada for Dealing with Allegations of Racial Harassment, 2008

Racial harassment is defined as unwanted or unwelcome verbal, written or physical conduct related to one's race, culture, nationality or ethnicity. It causes offence, intimidation and/or distress to the individual to whom it is directed. Such conduct may have the purpose or effect of interfering with an individual's full participation in the life and work of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

Racial harassment includes but is not limited to racial slurs and jokes; ridicule and insults; displaying racially offensive written or visual material degrading members of a particular race; name-calling; open hostility; unfair allocation of work and responsibilities; or exclusion from normal workplace conversation or social events. It may be linked to a person's place of origin, religion, citizenship or ethnic origin.

Policy and Procedures for Addressing Harassment in the Church, 2021

Harassment means physical or verbal behaviours against a member, volunteer or employee in the church that are unwelcome or should be known to be unwelcome.

Such behaviour may include unwelcome remarks or jokes about a person's race, religion, sex, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability or any other of the prohibited grounds of discrimination; threats or intimidation; or unwelcome physical contact, such as touching, patting or pinching.

Generally, harassment is a behaviour that persists over time. However, serious one-time incidents can also create a "poisoned environment" and be considered harassment.

Harassment may include bullying, which takes different forms:

- Physical bullying: using physical force or physical aggression against others (e.g., hitting)
- Verbal bullying: using words to hurt others (e.g., name-calling)

- Social/relational bullying: seeking to intimidate or harm others by excluding them, spreading rumors or ignoring them (e.g., gossiping)
- Cyberbullying: using electronic media to threaten, embarrass, intimidate or exclude others, including seeking to damage their reputation (e.g., sending threatening text messages)

One of the critical tasks of all leaders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada is to ensure that the people sharing the church's life and ministry understand:

- that The Presbyterian Church in Canada has set zero-tolerance standards for harassment and abuse of any kind
- that procedures for addressing harassment and abuse have been established
- that The Presbyterian Church in Canada is committed to using the established procedures to address complaints of harassment and abuse whenever they arise.

Harassment and abuse are destructive behaviours that grieve the heart of God and erode Christian community. Harassment and abuse hurt the individuals on whom these behaviours are inflicted and all those who love these individuals. Harassment and abuse dehumanize the abusers, create division between people, and aggravate conflict. Church communities where harassment and abuse have occurred serve as living illustrations of the biblical teaching that the church is one body, and that when one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with that person (I Cor 12:26).

Efforts to help make church courts and committees safer for all must include promoting awareness of the church's harassment and abuse policies, and using the policies promptly and diligently when complaints arise.

G. Closing Remarks

The Presbyterian Church in Canada faces daunting challenges. As indicated by many decisions made by the General Assembly in 2021, the denomination has made commitments to acknowledge that its approach to gender and sexuality has caused harm, and to learn how to change its heart and behaviour. At the same time, The Presbyterian Church in Canada is living into the new reality of adopting two parallel definitions of marriage.

The requested guidance to help make church courts and committees safer for all directs the church's attention to three tasks: (1) acknowledging the full diversity of gender and sexuality; (2) treating all persons respectfully no matter which of the two definitions of marriage adopted by the General Assembly they affirm; and (3) promoting awareness and use of the church's harassment and abuse policies.

While the challenges facing The Presbyterian Church in Canada are steep, the resources of Christian faith are greater still. The hope facing the church is that its life might be characterized by mature Christian discipleship, reliance on prayer, openness to the Holy Spirit's guidance, and confidence in the power of Christ to heal and reconcile. May God's abiding presence guide and sustain us all.